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TO FIT OR NOT TO FIT: INSIGHTS IN THE SEARCH FOR A JOB

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to gain insight in which organisation-specific information job seekers attach importance to, in order to determine whether they fit in an organisation. Our labour market is facing difficulties with inflow of labour forces. On the one hand our tight labour market situation causes that companies are unable to fill in their vacancies. On the other hand a high percentage of unemployed job seekers do not manage to find a job. In his selection-attraction-attrition theory Schneider (1995) states that people do not randomly come and work in an organisation, but that they select themselves in or out of an organisation. A good person-organisation fit can be considered as one of the critical success factors for attracting and retaining employees in a competitive and tight labour market (Kristof, 1997). Building on the above mentioned theories we propose that if organisations clearly communicate about their organisation-specific characteristics in beforehand, job seekers can form a better image of organisations. For organisations this can result in more effective selection processes, whereas for job seekers it can result in more effective application processes. Research until now has not covered this issue. To gain insight into the organisation-specific aspects job seekers attach importance to, a qualitative research was conducted consisting of 27 homogeneously composed focus groups. In a first stage unemployed job seekers were addressed, with special attention for those individuals who are unable or less able to search for a job independently. Next also employees and employment officers were involved in this research. Applying the Delphi-method and other discussion group moderating techniques, we found that clear communication of organisation-specific information plays an important role in the job search process of individuals. Based on the qualitative input throughout the different focus groups, we developed a typology of organisation-specific information items job seekers attach importance to in their search for a job.

Key words: job search, labour market

INTRODUCTION

If you had the choice between two identical jobs, though in two different organisations, which would be the criteria on which you would base yourself when making a choice? In other words, which organisation-specific information items do job seekers attach importance to, in order to determine whether they fit in an organisation? This was the underlying research question in the qualitative research conducted by Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School in the context of the EQUAL project 'Ambisys' that aims at a better information flow of organisations towards job seekers.

People are at the heart of any organisation, whether it is big or small. To find the right people is hence an important concern. Yet we state that organisations in Flanders are often unable to fill their vacancies and that a lot of job seekers stay unemployed. Before thinking of selection, candidates are needed. Not the number of candidates is of importance, but the number of good candidates. So it will be the first priority to attract these good candidates. Many 'useless' selection interviews can be avoided this way. A good candidate seems to be function of the person-job fit on the one hand, and of the person-organisation fit on the other hand. The person-job fit is the match between the individual and the requirements of a specific job, and is traditionally considered to be the foundation of selection (Edwards, 1994). This fit is a basic condition for successful employment: without the right competencies a candidate will not perform successfully. However, one may not ignore the importance of the person-organisation fit either (Kristof, 1996). The person-organisation fit is the degree of concordance between the individual and the organisation-specific aspects. This idea is fortified by the selection-attraction-attrition theory by Schneider (1995) who states that people do not randomly come and work in an organisation, but that they select themselves in or out of an organisation. A good person-organisation fit can be considered as one of the critical success factors for attracting and retaining employees in a competitive and tight labour market (Kristof, 1997). In addition, research shows that a good person-organisation fit leads to more positive work attitudes and better contextual performances. Based on the above, we can conclude that individuals attach importance to these organisation-specific aspects and that organisations do well by paying sufficient attention to this.

This qualitative research explores which organisation-specific aspects job seekers attach importance to. The contribution of this research lies in the fact that different groups of job seekers have been addressed.

Some organisations are well-known and a lot of people can form a more or less accurate image of these organisations. However, for the majority of the organisations this is not the case. This implies that job seekers often have no knowledge of organisations. Building on earlier research we propose that if organisations clearly communicate about their organisation-specific characteristics in beforehand, job seekers can form a better image of organisations. For organisations this can result in more effective selection processes, whereas for job seekers it can result in more effective application processes.

METHODOLOGY

To gain insight into the organisation-specific aspects job seekers attach importance to, a qualitative research was conducted consisting of homogeneously composed focus groups (Krueger, Casey, 2000).

In a first stage unemployed job seekers from different age categories and education levels were addressed, with special attention for those individuals who are unable or less able to search for a job independently. Also immigrants and disabled people were included in this research. For them the knowledge of certain organisation-specific aspects is of great importance. For, hindered by their psychosocial origin they often search for specific employment conditions. Next also employees were involved in this research: they successfully completed the search for a job and, based on their own experiences, they can better estimate what organisation-specific aspects they find really important. Finally also employment officers from the private and public sector were involved in this research. In their daily job they are confronted with those organisation-specific aspects job seekers attach importance to. On top of this, employment officers play an important role in passing on the correct information to the job seeker. Table 1 gives an overview of the composition of our sample, divided per category. The size of each subgroup is specified in percentages.

Insert Table 1 About Here

All participants were addressed in homogeneous focus groups of 8 to 12 persons. In each focus group an element of the Delphi technique was introduced (Hellendoorn, 1998). Before starting the discussion per question, the individual participants were first asked to write down their own vision. Group conformity could be avoided this way. In line with the literature on best practices for conducting focus groups, the funnelling approach was also used (Krueger, Casey, 2000). This means that more general questions were asked at the beginning of each focus group to start the discussion and next more specific questions were asked.

Based on the qualitative input that was gathered throughout all focus groups, an extensive typology was made by different researchers independently including those organisation-specific aspects job seekers attach importance to. The different information items were clustered according to the parameters relevance, workability and clarity. Items that were explicitly related to a specific vacancy were not included. Table 2 shows the typology of organisation-specific information items came forth from the research.

Insert Table 2 About Here

I. Work and organisation

Work is not something that takes place in a vacuum. On the organisation level characteristics such as structures, tasks and technology will influence the fit between a specific individual and an organisation. The organisation type refers to aspects such as organisation statute (Plc, ltd, non-profit organisation, etc.), the (inter)national character of the organisation, the kind of organisation (SME, multinational, etc.) and the size of the company. Reasons why job seekers attach importance to these aspects can be found in the fact that these have an impact on several aspects of organisation culture and atmosphere. Also the vision, mission and values of an organisation were often considered to be important factors according to the respondents.

If the employer and the employee want to be on the same wavelength, it is important that the employee recognizes himself in the vision, mission and values of the organisation. After all, all employees can be considered to be ambassadors of the organisation. Other aspects that do not escape the employees' attention concern the extent to which the organisation shows interest in business ethics, the environment, honesty and reliability. It is in this perspective that we have to see the importance of the organisation culture. The norms that an organisation has, is another related aspect. What are the company rules, what are the customs and habits that live in the organisation? Is a dress code required in the organisation? And last but not least, what is the work climate, the atmosphere at work?

Just as is the case with the vision and the mission of an organisation, it is essential for the respondents to agree with the company activities. It is not always clear for an outsider what exactly the company is doing. Job seekers also wish to gather information about products or services the company is offering and they want to know what the size of these activities is.

Furthermore, job seekers are interested in information on the company structure. The organisation chart is an interesting tool in this respect. It immediately shows whether the organisation has a flat or rather hierarchic structure. The number of establishments of a company and the location of the parent company also give an indication of the way in which the complete organisation has been built up.

An item that receives a lot of attention is the HRM policy of an organisation. This covers a number of aspects that has to do with the inflow, throughflow and outflow of personnel. Inflow stands for the information on the recruitment policy and the application process of an organisation. Job seekers often have questions on these topics which mostly remain unanswered. The training and development policy of an organisation can be considered as throughflow of personnel. The target groups of young job seekers and disabled job seekers find it interesting to have information on the initial period in an organisation, whereas the target group of employees is eager to find out about on the job training opportunities. The target group of older job seekers would like to have an answer to the question whether the organisation provides in additional internal training and whether a coaching system exists.

The different target groups also raise the question for information on development opportunities and the systems on which these are based. Also (early) retirement arrangements and ‘age-conscious human resource policy’ is an item of interest, especially for the target group of older job seekers.

Throughout all focus groups mobility appeared to be one of the main eye catchers. Job seekers are very keen to know where the company is located and what the accessibility is (by own or public transport).

II. Work circumstances

The work circumstances refer to the conditions in which work is being done and to all kind of parameters that are related to the concrete working environment. Our research reveals that job seekers attach importance to the (un)healthiness of the working environment and to safety. They would like to know the possible risks in advance.

For many job seekers the company infrastructure is a very important factor in the search for a job. Especially blue-collar workers tend to pay attention to the working materials and composition of the machinery. White-collar workers on the other hand pay attention to the ergonomics of office furniture. Especially for disabled people it is important that systems and machines are specially adapted. Pressure of work is another important item that was often mentioned.

III. Work relations

With work relations we refer to the relations that exist on the workplace, between employees among themselves, as well as between employer and employees. In the first place we see that many job seekers want to find out about the demography of an organisation. They want to inquire after the composition of the workforce, for example the number of employees by age, sex, nationality, degree, etc. Certain minority groups find in this information already an indication of the extent to which an organisation is open for their employees with their specific background. Also the information referring to a diversity policy is of importance: what is the attitude regarding minority groups, does the organisation have an ombudsperson, etc. Industrial relations were also mentioned: job seekers would like to find out about the degree of unionization and the social representation within the organisation.

Finally, job seekers would like to know which type of people they will work with in their team. They also attach importance to the fact whether they will work in an authoritarian or a democratic hierarchy.

IV. Terms of employment

With terms of employment we refer to all kinds of rules with regard to working hours and to the rewards employees receive in return for their work performances. Although these terms of employment often situate on the specific job level, and hence fall outside the scope of this research, we try to take into account a number of elements that can be applied to the whole organisation.

Job seekers appear to attach a lot of attention to information on the work regimen and working hours in an organisation. Especially for women, for older and disabled people it is important to know whether part-time and/or flexible employment is possible. Women often appear to search for a job that is compatible with children of school age. Some older employees are looking for a part-time job at the end of their career and sometimes disabled people are unable to work on a full-time basis.

The job security an organisation can offer also plays an important role. This is partly influenced by the stability and the economic situation of the organisation and sector. Job security appeared to be mentioned especially by those target groups that can require more from a (new) employer because of their more favourable position on the labour market. Groups that have a less favourable position on the labour market tend to give in more easily on this aspect. Financial rewarding is of course one of the main aspects job seekers attach importance to, although the requirements in this respect are closely related to the particular situation of the job seeker. Yet, the joint committee under which an organisation comes can already give an indication. Fringe benefits that are offered on a collective basis are also interesting parameters.

Based on the outcome of this qualitative research we can conclude that job seekers attach importance to a diversity of organisation-specific aspects. If a good person-organisation fit can be considered as one of the critical success factors for attracting and retaining employees in a competitive and tight labour market (Kristof, 1997), this research confirms that it is for the benefit of organisations that they clearly communicate about their organisation-specific characteristics.

TARGET GROUP DIFFERENCES

Although the above mentioned list contains an overview of the most important items that came forward throughout the different focus groups, we do not want to create the impression that each item is of equal importance for each subject. Depending on the background of the different target groups, other elements will come to the fore. Moreover, not every organisation is able to communicate about each of these items. For the organisation it comes down to choosing those items that are most desirable, given the organisation and given the job seekers the organisation wants to attract. In what follows we discuss the main target group differences.

Employed versus unemployed job seekers

It is obvious that the preferential differences between employees and unemployed job seekers are strongly influenced by the different point of view from which the labour market is being perceived. Employees will generally enter the labour market from a somewhat safer position, and thus they (can) make higher demands on future organisations. A lot of unemployed job seekers actively look for work and, confronted with the often difficult job search, they are sooner inclined to accept worse conditions of employment. In general they are very dissatisfied with the situation of unemployment and they want to do everything to find a job. It is remarkable how unemployed job seekers generally think on a more concrete level (in terms of specific job contents, pay, location and accessibility). They consider most of the above mentioned items rather as something extra. Only if an opportunity turns out to be really disappointing, unemployed job seekers tend to refuse it.

Another significant finding is that job seekers attach great importance to the knowledge employers have about all kinds of (re-)employment measures. They have the impression that this knowledge is not widespread or at least that the employers' willingness to recruit this way is rather limited.

Employees, on the other hand, generally make higher demands on a (new) employer. In general they can name more items, and these items are of greater importance for them too, as they would be sooner inclined to make a selection based on these criteria.

Lower versus higher educated

The level of education appears to be an important parameter in this research. In the first place it attracts the attention that lower educated people are much more sceptical and cynical towards the labour market. The search for a job is for many of them often a difficult and painful process. This does not enable them to make a selection based on many of the above mentioned criteria. Here as well we find that higher educated people generally make higher demands and can name more items. Lower educated people on the other hand, will pay more attention to very concrete and material work aspects. Hence what is important for higher educated people is often of less importance for lower educated people. They do appreciate these aspects, but forced by their situation they attach less importance to them.

The same line can be drawn for blue-collar versus white-collar workers. Blue-collar workers especially attach importance to the material and practical side, and to work circumstances. Besides this white-collar workers pay more attention to soft aspects, such as the atmosphere at work, the image and management style of the organisation, and career related information such as perspectives and career opportunities.

Younger versus older people

When abstracting from other research variables, such as level of education and origin, older job seekers especially differ from younger ones in their outspoken attention for job security. Stability, the health of the sector and company, job security and the perspectives an employer can offer are of major importance for them. In the first place older employees look for a steady job they can pursue until retirement age. Older employees were often made redundant in the past due to restructuring and reorganisation. They are cynical towards the labour market and they would not want to experience this once again.

Other aspects older people attach high importance to, are the openness of the organisation and the team towards older employees, as well as the (early) retirement plan of the company. Older people who start working in a new organisation, sometimes have the feeling being stigmatized or not being welcome, especially if the team consists of young people only. Therefore they look out for a diversified workforce with respect to age.

Finally, job seekers attach great importance to the knowledge organisations have about measures such as first-job agreements for younger or re-employment measures for older job seekers.

Men versus women

Only few differences exist between men and women that are not related to their schooling level or age. Yet it appears that women more often pay attention to the specific work regimen, the flexibility in working hours, leave arrangements and work-life balance. Also child care that is provided by the organisation is for young mothers a welcome benefit.

Little versus more work experience

Generally considered we found that the more work experience people have, the more demands they make on the new employer and the more items they name. Employees with less experience often name those aspects they are confronted with in their current job, whether or not these are experienced as positive. In this respect work can be seen as a trial and error process during which someone learns only after a while what is important for him or her in an organisation.

Employees with more work experience generally also name more criteria that relate to career and promotion prospects. Besides we also hear more concerns about pressure of work and work-life balance in the group of employees with more work experience. The family situation obviously plays an important role here.

Allochthonous versus autochthonous job seekers

In spite of the anti discrimination legislation the group of allochthonous job seekers remains harder to employ. Quite a lot of them are often faced with difficulties to find a good job, sometimes only because of their foreign name. For this reason they are inclined to content themselves with less favourable terms of employment and work circumstances. Furthermore they appear to give attention especially to those aspects that relate to diversity and the openness of the corporate culture towards allochthonous employees. They would like to know which organisations are actually willing to recruit allochthonous people. The company language is another important issue for them and it is often one of the greatest barriers to be able to start a new job. They are highly interested in ties an organisation has with other countries, for which their mother tongue can be of a great advantage.

Disabled people

Just like other minority groups, disabled people also give a lot of attention to the openness the organisation culture has towards them. They are often confronted with the consequences of prejudices and stigmatization. Next they are very interested in the presence of a specially adapted work place and working materials, and they would like to know whether the organisation allows for sufficient breaks and an adapted pace of work.

In line with previous considerations, disabled people attach great importance to the knowledge organisations have of CAO 26 (this collective agreement states that the employer who hires a person with a handicap recognized by the Flemish Fund, can have 5 to 50% of the total labour costs repaid by the Flemish Fund).

DISCUSSION

Our labour market is facing difficulties with inflow of labour forces. On the one hand our tight labour market situation causes that companies are unable to fill in their vacancies. On the other hand a high percentage of unemployed job seekers do not manage to find a job. Kristof (1997) states that a good person-organisation fit can be considered as one of the critical success factors for attracting and retaining employees in a competitive and tight labour market.

Most of the findings in this qualitative research do not give us very new insights. However, the contribution of this paper can be found in the challenge for organisations to communicate the desired information in a correct way: they need to communicate organisation-specific information that is appealing to the target group and that is not discriminating towards minority groups.

Organisations that take the above listed items into account can gain a competitive workforce advantage when providing this information for instance on the internet. It is obvious that not all items can be taken into account, but organisations can select those items that are of importance for them and that typify them. By communicating the desired information in advance, the recruitment and selection process can be dealt with much more efficiently. For, it is not the number of candidates that is of importance, but the number of candidates that have a good fit with the organisation. Through self-selection candidates will be able to make a first assessment in order to determine whether they fit in the organisation. As next to the job qualifications also characteristics of the organisation are considered, chances of retention of the recruited applicant will increase significantly. Sharing this information also helps employment officers answer the questions of job seekers and propose suitable candidates to organisations. This way a win-win situation is created for employee and employer.

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TABLE 1**Focus group details**

A. Employment officers – 6 focus groups (N=56)					
• Public (VDAB)	57,1%	• Private	42,9%		
• Male	35,7%	• Female	64,3%		
• Average age	36,9				
• Aver. # participants	9,3				
B. Unemployed job seekers – 15 focus groups (N=120)					
• <25 year	21,7%	• 25-45 year	62,5%	• > 45 year	15,8%
• Lower education	33,3%	• Sec. education	35%	• Higher education	31,7%
• Male	54%	• Female	46%		
• Disabled people	25,8%				
• Allochthonous people	23,3%				
• Aver. # participants	8,6				
C. Employees – 6 focus groups (N=56)					
• <1 year employment	46,4%	• >5 y employment	53,6%		
• Male	48,2%	• Female	51,8%		
• Lower education	25%	• Sec. education	26,8%	• Higher education	48,2%
• Aver. # participants	9,3				

TABLE 2

Typology of organisation-specific information items

I. WORK AND ORGANISATION

- **Organisation type** (e.g. (inter)national, size, statute, etc.)
- **History** (e.g. foundation date, founder, etc.)
- **Vision and mission**
- **Activities** (e.g. specialization, products, services, etc.)
- **Market** (e.g. image, turnover, profit, competitive position, etc.)
- **Cooperation** (e.g. customers, suppliers, selection partners, etc.)
- **Structure** (e.g. organisation chart, horizontal/vertical, departments, etc.)
- **Culture** (e.g. ethical conduct, environmentally conscious, etc.)
- **HRM-policy** (e.g. recruitment, training & development, evaluation, etc.)
- **Job security** (e.g. labour turnover, average seniority, etc.)
- **Company language**
- **Social** (e.g. team events, work-life balance, ombudsperson, etc.)
- **Mobility** (e.g. location, accessibility, parking facilities, carpooling, company transport, etc.)
- **Application** (e.g. procedure, contact person spontaneous application, etc.)
- **Introduction** (e.g. open day, company day, company visit, etc.)
- **Miscellany** (e.g. smoking policy, etc.)

II. WORK CIRCUMSTANCES

- **Infrastructure** (e.g. modern/outdated machinery, office furniture, view, look & feel, etc.)
- **Facilities** (e.g. restaurant, parking, child care, smoking area, etc.)
- **(Un)healthy working environment** (e.g. noise, smell, hygiene, etc.)
- **Safety** (e.g. accident rate, working clothes, etc.)
- **Ergonomics** (e.g. chairs, keyboard, specially adapted for disabled people, etc.)
- **Outdoor/indoor work**
- **Pressure of work**
- **Dress code**

III. WORK RELATIONS

- **Demography** (e.g. number of employees by age, sex, nationality, handicap, degree, etc.)
- **Diversity** (e.g. diversity policy, attitude regarding minority groups, ombudsperson, etc.)
- **Industrial relations** (e.g. degree of unionization, social representation, etc.)
- **Team** (e.g. number and type of employees within departments, etc.)
- **Management** (e.g. personality of manager, authoritarian versus democratic and involvement, etc.)

IV. TERMS OF EMPLOYMENT

- **Working hours** (e.g. flexibility, breaks, shift work, weekend shift, evening shift, homework, overtime, etc.)
- **Pay** (e.g. pay scales, hourly pay, fringe benefits, insurance, bonus, etc.)
- **Leave** (e.g. number of days of leave, flexibility of leave arrangements, social and educational leave, etc.)
- **Career** (e.g. training, horizontal & vertical career opportunities, introduction, training period, etc.)